

("I sound forth in praise of Thomas,
Bim! Bom! without false promise.")

The bell was again recast in 1680, with a new inscription that begins: "*Magnus Thomas Clusius Oxoniensis Renatus Aprilis VIII Anno MDCLXXX*," and it first rang out on Restoration Day, 29 May 1684.⁷ "Bim! Bom!" thus faded into fable, leaving only the name, "Great Tom" (with reference, of course, to that other great Becket, Thomas). Nowhere else in his writings does Samuel Beckett refer to this bell, and perhaps not even to Oxford,⁸ but as Murphy might say, "by a striking coincidence" the B-flat from Tom Tower mingles with the Pavlovian percussion of Skinner's House in a curiously compelling cracked tone.

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NOTES

1. Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (1938; New York: Grove Press, 1957) 156.
2. Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett's Theater* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 177.
3. Samuel Beckett, "Yellow," *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934; London: Calder and Boyars, 1970) 176. The ultimate joke, of course, is on Belacqua, whose personality is effaced when the operation is botched.
4. Cohn, 176–77, where the deleted passages are cited in full.
5. Samuel Beckett, *What Where, Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) 312.
6. James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996) 744. The suggestion is a good one, although nothing else in *The Colonel's Daughter* or its "epilogue" seems pertinent; that Aldington could use the names like this suggests their common currency.
7. See, for example, Cecil Headlam, *The Story of Oxford* (London: Dent, 1907) 54–55; and W. G. Hiscock, *A Christ Church Miscellany* (Oxford, England: privately printed, 1946) 143–51. My thanks also to John Pilling (University of Reading) and Judith Curthous (Christ Church, Oxford) for their assistance with this detail.
8. The name of the Mercyseat, however, may echo Belacqua's feelings about families, in Samuel Beckett's *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (Dublin: Black Cat Press, 1992) 177: "they tend to make us magdalen" (pronounced "maudlin").

Wright's NATIVE SON

Richard Wright concludes "How 'Bigger' Was Born," his essay on the writing of *Native Son*, with an unequivocal condemnation of race relations in America in the 1940s. His horror at the state of relations between black and white Americans is well known and provides the basis for the plot and theme of *Native Son*. What is unexpected about this concluding passage is not, therefore, his expression of personal horror, but rather the author with whom he

associates that horror. He writes: "And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him" (540).

This specific reference to Poe has not, to my knowledge, excited specific scholarly comment; however, it contributes to the explication of a particular scene in *Native Son*. Wright's description of the murder of Mary Dalton echoes the writing of Poe. Like Poe, Wright creates a feeling of horror through strong contrasts in color. So, for example, although in Poe's short story "Ligeia" the hero expects to see the "fair-haired, the blue-eyed Lady Rowena" beneath the white bandages, what he finds instead is "huge masses of long and dishevelled hair; it was *blacker than the raven wings of the midnight!*" (322); and in "The Fall of the House of Usher": "There was *blood* upon her *white* robes and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame" (140, emphasis added). Similarly, in *Native Son* Wright describes Mary's decapitation in terms of color contrasts. He captures, first, the contrast between Mary's white flesh and the reflected red of the knife: "Wistfully, he gazed at the edge of the blade resting on the white skin; the gleaming metal reflected the tremulous fury of the coals" (105). He then depicts a contrast between the white of the newspaper and the red blood: "Then blood crept outward in widening circles of pink on the newspapers" (106). Finally, in a move Poe would have appreciated, Wright combines this contrast between red and white with a description of Mary's black hair: "The head hung limply on the newspapers, the curly black hair dragging about in blood" (106).

This echoing of Poe would only be a matter of interest, and not of explication, were it not for the cat. The chopping up of Mary Dalton and placing her in the furnace is witnessed by a cat, a *white* cat. Because *Native Son* is very much concerned with portrayals of white and black (and the prejudices in America on the basis of color) it is important to remember that Poe's demonic cat was black. In this scene, Wright carefully alludes to Poe's "The Black Cat." By so doing, Wright cleverly rewrites some of the racist assumptions (created by the superstitions of a white community) inherent in Poe's text.

Several passages in *Native Son* concern the cat, but the most important of them in establishing a connection to Edgar Allan Poe reads,

A noise made him whirl; two green burning pools—(pools of accusation and guilt—stared at him from a white blur that sat perched upon the edge of the trunk. His mouth opened in a silent scream and his body became hotly paralyzed. It was the white cat and its round green eyes gazed past him at the white face hanging limply from the fiery furnace door. *God!* He closed his mouth and swallowed. Should he catch the cat and kill it and put it in the furnace, too? He made a move. The cat stood up; its white fur bristled; its back arched. He tried to grab it and it bounded past him with a long wail of fear and scampered up the steps and through the door and out of sight. (105)

The hero's sudden feeling of hot paralysis, his invocation to God, and his silent scream are all common Poe devices. More specifically, the cat appears as a "white blur that sat perched upon the edge of the trunk," whereas in "The Black Cat," the cat appears as "some black object reposing upon the head of one of the immense hogsheads of gin or of rum" (112). In Poe's text it is the cat who reveals the narrator's guilt to the police: "[the cat's] informing voice had consigned me to the hangman" (118). Correspondingly, in Wright's text, when the reporters appear, "the big white cat bounded down the steps and leaped with one movement upon Bigger's shoulder and sat perched there. Bigger was still, feeling that the cat had given him away, had pointed him out as the murderer of Mary" (232). Finally, just as in Wright's text Bigger ends up cutting off Mary's head with a "hatchet" (106), in Poe's tale the narrator murders his wife with an axe. And like Bigger, Poe's narrator contemplates "cutting the corpse into minute fragments and destroying them by fire" (115).

The obvious question arising from these similarities is whether Wright imitated Poe simply because Poe knew how to write a good horror story, or whether Wright had additional reasons. I suspect that someone who knew his Poe as well as Wright obviously did had other motivations. Two passages in "The Black Cat" relate, I believe, specifically to the matter that Wright hoped to redress. Poe's narrator informs us that his wife "made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise" (108). In addition, at the story's conclusion the narrator contends that it was the black cat "whose craft had seduced [him] into murder" (118). In a passage that neatly subverts Poe's tale, it is not surprising to find that the white cat represents another point of view: the idea that not everyone shares that same set of ancient popular notions, and that some have reason to dislike Poe's easy association between blackness and evil.

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 Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. 1940. New York: Harper, 1993.
 ———. "How 'Bigger' Was Born." *Native Son*. 503–540.